

# Eloquent Irony

## The Ceramic Art of Juris Bergins

Article by Joseph Bennion



**I**N JUNE OF 1989, I travelled with 15 other American ceramic artists to the Soviet Union to meet and exchange ideas with our peers. In various cities we showed slides and exhibited our work and our hosts at the academies and artists' unions showed their work. Along the way our Intourist guide assured us of the superiority of the Soviet system for artists, and spoke of what advantages the artists enjoyed under socialism. Her enthusiasm was not as contagious as she hoped.

In Riga, the capital of Latvia, we gathered one mid-summer afternoon at the Artists Union for an exchange slide talk with an interested group of artists. After the Americans had introduced themselves, told where they were from and showed their slides, the Latvians took their turn, facilitated by our Russian-speaking Intourist guide. A tall reserved man in his late 20s stood up and began to speak. The interpreter paused, swallowed and delivered his first line: "I am Juris Bergins, I was born in 1961 in Soviet-occupied Latvia." There was a perceptible wave that passed through the room. The images that he showed were obviously political, personal and generally anti-Soviet. The work he showed was remarkably different from the other Latvian work we were seeing. It was out of step with the generally conservative and classical orientation of the other Baltic artists. As the session ended I approached him and we spoke briefly about his work. He invited me and two friends to his apartment that evening and later – in the small flat that he and his artist wife, Ilona Romule, shared with her mother – we enjoyed a meal and conversation. In spite of a considerable language gap, we communicated and shared our feelings about clay and life. They expressed their hopes for freedom in Latvia, which had been occupied by the Soviets since 1940 when it was liberated from Nazi Germany. For 20 years prior to World War II, Latvia was a free and independent republic. In 1987 pressure from the Latvian people slowly began to loosen the Soviet grip on this tiny Baltic country.

It was a warm and memorable evening, and my impressions of it are clear and bright. Juris and Ilona

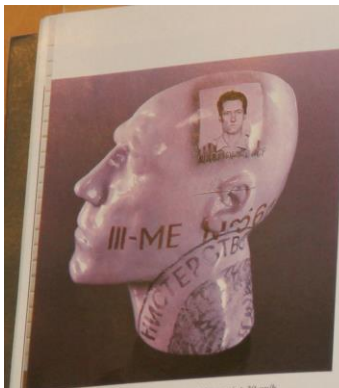
showed us their tiny work space and homemade electric kiln, in which Ilona produced a line of work to support themselves. They spoke of their dream of getting their own apartment, a studio, a reliable car and perhaps having a family.

During the time since my first meeting with the Bergins, I have thought about them often and tried to correspond. One or two letters have made it over and back, sometimes hand-delivered by other artists passing through. In October of 1991, I returned to Riga for a ceramics symposium and with the help of Latvian-born American artist, Juta Savage, I was able to interview Bergins and obtain photographs.

Juris Bergins began his formal art training in a special secondary school for young people gifted in the visual arts. He attended this programme for seven years, obtaining a basic technical foundation in drawing and painting. Later he spent five years studying design at the Latvian Academy of Art in Riga. Upon graduation he taught art to children at a collective farm, being required to do this or serve in the military. At the school he distinguished himself as a superior teacher. Several of his students received recognition and awards, something that had never happened at this country school before. At the end of his three



*Self Portrait with Ilona. China paint on factory porcelain blank. 24 cm/diam.*



*Self Portrait. Clay, glaze and china paint. 30 cm h.*



*Breakfast. Chamotte clay, porcelain, glaze, china paint. 45 x 47 cm.*

years of teaching he was persuaded to teach for a fourth year, finishing in 1989.

Since graduation from the fine arts academy he assisted Ilona with her ceramics. All the while, but had great need to express himself artistically. What happened next proved to be a seminal period for one of Latvia's most original and significant young ceramic artists.

In January of 1989, Bergins was invited to attend a symposium in Dzintari, Latvia, dealing with china painting. At the symposium he produced his first finished ceramic piece. It is titled *Self Portrait with Ilona*. While working at Dzintari, Bergins was happy to be producing his own art again. During art school he had become obsessed with tight control over the subject matter and this was the direction his ceramic work was to take. While at Dzintari, he also began to ask why he should just paint on commercial porcelain shapes rather than make his own shapes. In February of 1989 he produced his first piece at home, titled *Self Portrait*. It consists of a clay image of his own head, press-moulded from a life casting. On the glazed surface of the head are various images and graphics from his Soviet passport. This piece was exhibited that year at Riga at an exhibition of young Latvian ceramic artists.

During July and August of that year, Bergins met and talked with ceramists from the West for the first time. In addition to the American group already mentioned, there was a gathering of Latvian ceramists from Canada at Riga. Through this time Bergins continued to make art. In December of 1989, Bergins was again at a symposium in Dzintari which included artists from other Soviet republics. At this symposium Bergins produced two of his most impressive pieces: *Breakfast* and *Caviar with Vegetables*. In these pieces we see some of the multi-layered meaning and caustic irony that sets Bergins' work apart from that of his contemporaries. *Breakfast* is a response to a newspaper article he saw which celebrated the appearance of a popular Russian actress on the cover of the American magazine *Playboy*. It features a large fish wrapped in the cover of the magazine sitting on a brick. To the Western observer it is quite obvious that the word 'Plobyay' is misspelled. What was not so apparent to the people at *Playboy* is a Russian error on the actress's T-shirt. The piece is a biting criticism of Western perceptions of Soviet life as well as an internal lampoon of that system. *Caviar with Vegetables* is a photo-realistic rendering of a typical can of vegetables found in many Latvian and Soviet grocery stores. The 100 times larger-than-life-can is partly opened revealing the contents to be small human skeletons. This macabre twist also expresses the artist's perceptions about Moscow-style socialism.

During 1991, the artist continued to work at home and also travelled with his wife to Alberta, Canada, to

visit Latvian-born artist Anita Dumins. On this journey they were exposed to a wealth of Western ceramics. In mid-1990, his piece *Self Portrait* was published in *American Craft* in an article about the American visit to the Soviet Union of 1989. Bergins was also admitted to the Union of Artists—a great advantage since union membership meant access to materials, exhibitions and recognition. Prior to this he had resisted membership in the union because of its close ties to Moscow. After 1989, the union became more Latvian based.

In early 1991, Latvia's slow but steady progress towards political autonomy suffered a severe setback. A crackdown by the Soviet Black Berets left six or more Latvian civilians dead and threatened to reverse the hard-won political yardage gained over the past few years. A sense of shock and disbelief gripped many Latvians. During this time Bergins produced another significant piece titled *Never But* which translates into 'How can this be?' In what appears to be a pail for household garbage we see the artist's head, naturalistically rendered, a dirty rag, a pre-Soviet Latvian gold coin and a page from a magazine bearing the image of the artist's wife and the words 'never but'. On the outside of the pail is stuck the torn half of a wrinkled one rouble note. As in Bergins' other work, this piece has an eloquent irony that is biting and direct. It leaves one with a dark sense of hopelessness in the face of the Soviet power. The same dark emotion is captured in the recent piece I saw in Riga made in 1991 after the failed coup in Moscow and the general acceptance of Latvia's independence by the Western powers. It refers to the time in the development of a plant when blossoms begin to turn into fruit, a time of great hope, critical to the future of the plant. Out of a low black cauldron filled with coarse sand emerges a tall black object not unlike a finger with long thorns protruding from its entire length. The end of the finger-like object appears to be bloodied. Exuding from the side of the black form is a large leadrop whose surface bears an accurate and upside-down portrait of the artist. This mysterious and abstract piece leaves one with a feeling of confusion and anxiety, accurately portraying the artist's feelings about this time. In this time of independence, concrete barricades in the centre of Riga remind us that the Red Army is still present. Long queues, empty shops and a flourishing black market keep the memory of socialism alive.

Juris Bergins feels that his emotions are of primary importance and he wants people to be able to read the emotional content in his work. He feels that the ceramic medium is ideally suited to this task because it is three dimensional, as we are. He feels that by encountering real objects in space there is a better chance for the transference of emotional energy to take place. Among Latvian ceramists, Juris Bergins stands alone in several ways. Because his formal training was in painting and design he was not heavily



*Never But. Chamotte clay, porcelain, glaze, china paint. 45 x 37 cm.*

influenced by the Baltic/Soviet school of ceramics with its characteristic classicism and formality. However, through his involvement with teaching and helping Ilona, he developed tremendous facility with and knowledge of ceramic materials and processes. With his need to tell his story, when he finally began to work freely in clay, his work burst on the Latvian ceramics scene with a freshness and power that was remarkable. Isolated from Western art, he developed his art independently of contemporary Western influences.

Bergins is a quiet and unassuming man. He doesn't seek the spotlight but makes pointed comment. His remarkable artwork is the result of introspection and honest expression. It is deeply personal and narrative but invites the viewer to join in. I asked him what issues he will deal with now and he said he didn't know. He is waiting for the ever-changing conditions in his homeland to speak to him and he will no doubt continue to provide us with emotionally and aesthetically potent material.

Joseph Bonomo is a studio potter living in Spring City, Utah. The photographs of Bergins' work used to illustrate this article were taken by Laimonis Stepanovs of Riga, Latvia.